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Entrevista com Dom Carlos Felipe X. Belo

THE VOICE OF THE MONSIGNOR FROM WAILILI

Tempo, 1 September, 1984
Jakarta

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Although his face is relatively 'new' in East Timor, Monsignor Belo who replaced Monsignor da Costa Lopez, is also a native of the region. He was overseas for a long time and was in Lisbon, the Portuguese capital, at the time of the unrest in 1975; he was there until 1978, studying philosophy and theology. He then continued his studies in Rome for two years, in the Salesian Order.

By contrast with Mgr da Costa Lopes who speaks unfavourably about the integration of East Timor and who is now living in Portugal, Mgr Belo prefers to speak with moderation. Yet recently, his name was spotlighted by many people. Some Western journalists were able to meet him and interview him when he was in Jakarta to attend the 450th anniversary of the foundation of the Catholic Church in Indonesia. Previously, in the middle of February, Monsignor indeed sent a letter to Mgr Lopes criticising the conditions in some districts of East Timor which, in his opinion, had "got worse". It is not clear why this letter was subsequently quoted a great deal in foreign newspapers, but he is surprised that a private letter of his - written in Portuguese and translated into English - was reproduced in the foreign press.

That afternoon in a meeting place not far from that shady field (in a kampung in the village of Wailili, East Timor), Mgr Belo who returned home from Rome in 1981, received five senior journalists from Jakarta, among them Fikri Jufri of Tempo. There follow some important quotations from the interview with Mgr Belo:

What are your impressions after working three years as Bishop of Dili[1] and travelling about in East Timor?

First of all, everything is by the grace of God. God works within the heart so that people can know His path. I have seen the pastors and the ordinary people working very hard in their respective regions. I have also seen that everyone in East Timor has joined the Catholic Church. They see things through the Church, they get protection. They feel that we are close to them.

Do people feel that there are difficulties now so that they ask the Church for protection?

There aren't difficulties but there are things lacking (kekurangan).

What things are lacking?

People want the freedom to go to the market, to the rice-fields, to the gardens and to the regions. If people living in the kecamatan-kecamatan (sub-district centres) were able to move around, their social and economic living conditions would be better.

1) Mgr Belo in fact became the Bishop, or more correctly, the Apostolic Administrator of Dili, in May 1983. TAPOL.

But the government provides many facilities to help the people, doesn't it?

Yes, the government provides facilities to help the people. But the important thing is that they should be able to feel that this development is for them, and in order for them to be able to enjoy it. People here want to live quiet lives. What they need is a quiet life. This is important.

What do you think the government needs to do in order to create the quiet life you want?

There are still many people on guard, patrols. When such things happen in the forests, it is understandable. But in the small towns, people may not go further than two kilometres. Every time people want to go to the rice-fields, they must have a travel-pass (surat jalan).

Isn't there still a danger from Fretilin?

Yes, their tactic now is to provoke the government, by shooting, killing, stealing and burning down people's property. They feel that the people are not happy with their methods and that they are beginning to oppose. And I have said that they are mistaken.

Have you told Fretilin that their methods are harmful to the people? Or, said this in public, for instance during a mass?

Everyone knows my opinion of not liking these provocative methods. But I haven't had the opportunity of meeting them face to face. It is difficult to send a message through someone else, because in addition to fear, we don't know where they are hiding.

Some foreign newspapers have recently quoted you as having a very critical opinion regarding the present situation in East Timor. A critical letter from you was even published in the foreign press, among others in the Australian paper, The Age.

I read that too. Some things I said in that interview were quoted out of context. And my interview was also misinterpreted. As for my letter to Mgr da Costa Lopes I too was surprised to see it published by the press. That was a private letter which I wrote on 16 February. I discussed the contents of that letter with Brig-General Sutarto (commander of XVIth Military Command/Udayana) the before, on 15 February, concerning what was going on in East Timor at the time.

Is the situation better now?

Yes, it's begun to improve by comparison with formerly.

What steps do you think need to be taken now?

I think there should be talks with Fretilin again. They need to talk with community leaders, with Church representatives, in order to create a tranquil situation. And I am willing to act as intermediary.

But their leaders, such as Xanana Gusmao, adhere to Marxist-Leninist ideology and don't want to accept the fact of integration. Would it not be a waste of time to talk to them?

I don't know whether they are really Marxists. I have not yet made any analysis about that. Some of them have asked to be baptised, for instance when there's a marriage. This year, though, there haven't been any requests of this nature.

Would the negotiations you refer to take place within the context of East Timor being the 27th province of the Indonesian Republic?

The reality is that the people of East Timor want peace, they want development. Self-determination as demanded by Fretilin is difficult. So, let's just think about building for the future of East Timor. To do this, the government will have to be able to win the hearts and minds of the people.

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